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Depicting woman as a Cyborg in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and  
*The Handmaid's Tale*

**Abstract:** The present paper primarily intends to discuss the novels of Margaret Atwood *The Edible Woman* and *The Handmaid's Tale* by using cyborgian poetics. The main purpose is to interpret the female protagonist in the respective works of Atwood as cyborgs. The concept of Cyborg was first used in the context of feminist discourse by Donna Haraway, a prominent philosopher and feminist. The term cyborg is defined as a cybernetic organism that has increased physical as well as mental capabilities in today's highly globalized era. The paper also focuses on the concept of cyborg and its relevance to understand the woman's position. The women characters in *The Edible Woman* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are portrayed as cyborgs who have the potential to reject all the patriarchal ideologies and to challenge victimisation of women.

**Keywords:** Cyborg, Cybernetic, Dystopian Novel, Self-Reliant, Autonomy

### Introduction:

The purpose of the paper is to explore Margaret Atwood's novels *The Edible Woman* and *The Handmaid's Tale* through Cyborgian perspective. The paper focuses on the depiction of women characters of Atwood's novels as Cyborgs. Margaret Atwood, a prolific Canadian novelist, poet, literary critic and essayist. Atwood, born on November 18, 1939 in Ottawa, Canada is widely recognized as a feminist and social activist. She grows up in Northern Ontario, Quebec, and Toronto. She receives her undergraduate degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto and master's degree from Radcliffe College. She is one of the most honoured authors of fiction in recent history. She is the author of more than thirty five volumes of poetry, fiction and non-fiction. She is best known for her work as a novelist. Her notable works include *The Edible Woman* (1970), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *Oxyx* and *Crake* (2003). Her famous short fiction collections are *Dancing Girls* (1977), *Murder in the Dark* (1983), *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983), *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), *Days of the Rebel* (1977), *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on writing* (2002) are among her non-fiction collections. Through her writing career, Margaret Atwood receives numerous awards and honorary degrees. She is the recipient of more than 55 awards in Canada and internationally, including Governor General's Award, Arther C. Clarke Award, Booker Prize, Prince of Asturias Award for Literature and many others. Her works has been translated into many languages including French, German, Italian, Urdu, Turkish, Russian, Japanese, and Spanish etc.

Margaret Atwood expresses her feminist views through her writings. In her novels, she often portrays female characters dominated by patriarchy. Her characters break the shackles of exploitative social relationship and understand their place in the natural order. She voices strong feminist themes through her writings. Most of her novels present female protagonists as the representation of women who are victimized and minimized by gender and politics. Her novels can be viewed as the portrayal of strength and proactive nature of women as they struggle with inequality.

Margaret Atwood's feminist ideology is neither male-centred nor female-centred, rather her female characters attempt to blur the boundaries between various dichotomies like man-woman, human-machine, and human-animal. Her novels witness her innate desire to disrupt the gender system and to create a new ideal world, where man and woman are treated equally and complementary to one another. As Christine Gomez remarks, 'Atwood's novels are based on the politics of gender' (Gomez, p.74). The works of Atwood are the presentation of women's oppression by patriarchal system and women's realisation of independent selfhood and self-definition.

Donna Haraway's concept of cyborg, a cybernetic organism, can be applied to the novels of Margaret Atwood. Haraway in her brilliant essay *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* used the term 'cyborg feminism' (Haraway, p.431), according to which the boundaries between man, woman, animal and machine are diminished due to the creation of cybernetic organism, a blend of human and machine. She asserts that the use of innovative technology by women prove to be beneficial in their search for autonomy and self-assertion. Haraway's cyborgian metaphor

represents a perfect genderless world in post-modern and post-industrial society. The cyborgian feminism is evident in the novels of Margaret Atwood. Her women characters are portrayed as Cyborgs.

Margaret Atwood, in her novels, presents that both male and female characters 'transgress boundaries' (Haraway, p.428) of gender, where both masculinity and femininity can be appropriated by the people of either sex. The idea of cyborg conceptualised by Donna Haraway has been presented quite effectively by Margaret Atwood in her novels *The Edible Woman* and *The Handmaid's Tale* to substantiate its relationship with the feminism.

#### The Edible Woman:

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* (1969) presents the story of a young girl, Marian MacAlpin and her relationship to man, to society and to food. She is a young ambitious girl, working in a company in Toronto. She is engaged to Peter Wollander who is a lawyer by profession. The novel traces various stages in Marian's revolt against male domination. She rebels against patriarchal society by stopping to eat food. In the first half of the novel, Marian tells about various aspects of her life and job. She suffers from gender discrimination in the company where she works. She confronts another identity crisis after her engagement with Peter. She becomes disillusioned with her job as well as with Peter. In the second part of the novel, she realises that Peter is trying to reduce her into an edible commodity. She thinks that after marriage, her identity and individuality will be destroyed. She says, 'My mind was at first as empty as though someone had scooped out the inside of my skull like a cantaloupe and left me only the rind to thing with.' (Atwood, p.83) She

undergoes excessive psychic changes. Her disillusionment with job and Peter affects her psyche. She is torn between various dichotomies like her traditional role as a wife and her search for autonomy. This inner conflict results in anorexia nervosa, an eating disorder, to what Susan Bordo calls, 'a gender related and historically localised disorder.' (Bordo, p.28) She stops eating anything and refuses to be victimised in all the facets of life including job and marriage. Marian's non-consumption of food can be seen as her resistance to being forced into a feminine role. Her rejection of food is symbolic of her rejection of age old patriarchal norms. She makes an effort to rebel against the gender discrimination and oppression. She undergoes a transformation from a traditional and stereotypical woman to a self-aware and rebellious woman. As Coral Ann Howells remarks, 'The Edible Woman is an imaginative transformation of a social problem into comic satire as one young woman rebels against her feminine destiny as the edible woman.' (Howells, p.20) Towards the end of the novel, she tries to reconstruct her identity outside the symbolic and social order by defying the age-old patriarchal norms. She confronts the patriarchal paradigms and emerges as non-victim. In this way, her quest for self-assertion by defying all the boundaries is parallel to cyborgian concept of Haraway.

#### The Handmaid's Tale:

The Handmaid's Tale (1986) has been regarded as a dystopian novel set in future portraying 21<sup>st</sup> century America, the Republic of Gilead. It presents the futuristic time when women are considered only as a medium of reproduction. The novel has earned Atwood Governor General's Award, the Los Angeles

Times Prize and has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Atwood considers this novel as a speculative fiction rather than science fiction. She says that everything that happens in her novel is possible and may even have already happened.

The underlying theme of *The Handmaid's Tale* is to expose patriarchal dominance, gender inequality, political subjugation of woman's body and sexual violence. Atwood attempts to highlight woman's search for autonomy and independence. The novel emphasizes various ways according to which power dominates sex. The novel exposes the unequal distribution of power between the individuals. As Nathalie Cooke comments, '*The Handmaid's Tale* takes aim at gender inequality, is, consequently more representative of Atwood's work as a whole.' (Cooke, p.113)

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a post-modernist feminist novel in which Atwood portrays the central protagonist, Offred as a cyborg who raises her voice against the marginalisation and exploitation of women in the Republic of Gilead. Offred, the female protagonist is portrayed as a Handmaid, one of the various classes of women in Gilead, who serves as a substitute sex object by elite for bearing children. The Handmaids are defined, 'not even by the category of gender, but quite narrowly by that of female fertility.' (Marta, p.27)

The Handmaids are the young women who perform the role of child bearing for commanders whose wives are infertile. Their uniform is red-coloured and their faces are hidden by peaked hats, so that they can only see what is lying immediately in front of them. They are not even allowed to talk to one another. In Gilead, Handmaid's identity is solely dependent on her ability to reproduce children. If any handmaid won't be able to produce children for commanders,

then she is declared unwoman and is forced to clear toxic wastes in remote areas.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the woman's body becomes symbolic and clear indicators for the state of nature and earth. The narrator, Offred, is compelled by the circumstances to become a Handmaid, a woman who is subordinate to an elite officer, the Commander named Fred, to bear children for him. She has been denied all the freedom, even her name, like all Handmaids, consists of her Commander's name, Fred. The name of every Handmaid indicates the name of man, to whom she is assigned as Handmaid. Her name denotes her subordination by high status Commander named Fred. She is not permitted to think and feel. She is neither allowed to read nor to write. In Gilead, she finds none with whom she can share her emotional trauma. She says, 'I'll pretend you can hear me. But it's no good, because I know you can't'. (Atwood, p.50)

Offred's flashbacks give several instances of her past in pre-Gileadean times – her job, her relationship with her husband Luke, her daughter. Her husband was shot and her daughter was snatched away from her. In her nightmares she often sees her daughter 'holding out her arms to me, being carried away'. (Atwood, p.85) She is forced to leave her job. She is forced to perform the role of Handmaid of Commander. She presently lives in the house of Commander and his infertile wife, Serena Joy. Initially, Commander treats Offred as a handmaid, but soon he develops relationship with her. He secretly plays scrabble game with her, takes her to night club, and gives her cosmetics and books. All these activities are officially forbidden for Handmaids.

Offred tells her tale in order to give vent to her inner feelings, experiences and to express her quest for identity. In this sense, she becomes the mouthpiece of

the Handmaids of Gilead. Describing the fate of Handmaid, Offred remarks, 'We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices.' (Atwood, p.146) Her storytelling is a kind of hope for her psychological and emotional survival. This act of narrating her story is a medium with which she can remember what she was and what she hopes to be again. As Coral Ann Howells comments, 'during her life time, Offred finds herself in the familiar dystopian predicament of being trapped inside a space and narrative where she is denied any possibility of agency.' (Howells, p.164)

She refuses to be silenced and suppressed by Gileadean regime. Instead, she narrates her story and the experiences of other women as well. Her act of storytelling lends voice to other women characters of the novel. She tells the story of her friend, Moira, who rebels against the aunts, leaves rehabilitation centre and works in a brothel. Offred also narrates the agony of Ofglen, her shopping partner and Janine, Handmaid Ofwarren. She narrates the predicaments and helplessness of Serena, Commander's wife who is incapable of bearing children. Offred's narrative of memory is considered as an act of rehabilitation and reconstruction by subverting patriarchal paradigms, who try to repress the identity of a woman. In this sense, Offred emerges as a cyborg who revolts against a Gileadean society.

Offred's revolt is a kind of resistance against phallocentric framework. Margaret Atwood presents her as a cyborg who emerges as a rebel and who attempts to breakaway all repressive oedipals. Offred has 'the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.' (Haraway, p.447)



Atwood delineates Offred as Haraway's cyborg, who has the potential to disrupt boundaries. She escapes from Gileadean regime who attempts to repress woman's identity. She narrates her story of oppression and victimization by Gileadean society, where 'the fate of women is seen and used as mere means of procreation.' (Klarer, p.136) Towards the end of the novel, Offred escapes from the clutches of Gileadean regime with the help of Nick, Commander's Chauffeur in the Black Van. Offred questions the patriarchal ideologies of Gilead and establishes herself as a self-reliant and self-aware woman. In this sense, she is presented as a cyborg who has the potential to subvert all the repressive strategies.

Joan Smith comments, 'The Handmaid's Tale describes a world in which women were reduced to the status of breeders and denied the most basic human rights.' (Smith) Rather than portraying the character of Offred as a captive to Gileadean regime and the traditional norms of the society, Atwood depicts her as a cyborg, as a courageous human being who has the capacity to raise voice against victimization. Offred, though, entangled within the repressive Gileadean society, manages to assert herself by claiming her own private space. Her assertion, according to Coral Ann Howells, 'addresses questions about the feminine subject's position within a rigidly patriarchal system and women's possible strategies of resistance.' (Howells, p.99) Offred's attempt to subvert the existing patriarchal norms is consistent with Haraway's cyborgian metaphor.

### Conclusion:

There is a close parallelism between the novels of Margaret Atwood and Donna Haraway's cyborg. Haraway's cyborg tends to disrupt the binary oppositions. The female protagonists of Atwood's novels also deconstruct dualism like culture/nature, male/female, and human/machine. As Sherrill Grace Points out that Atwood's search for 'a third way of being outside of the either/or alternatives which her system resists.' (Grace, p.16) Atwood considers woman as a human being, irrespective of any kind of gender bias. The women characters of Margaret Atwood question orderly power structure and fixed dichotomies. Margaret Atwood 'crosses disciplinary boundaries' (Gledhill, p.40) and her novels portray the female characters who attempt to experiment across genre boundaries. Haraway's cyborgian poetics is conspicuously depicted in the novels of Margaret Atwood. Her women characters are presented as cyborgs who acquire the potential and capabilities to disrupt patriarchal paradigms.

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